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AUTHOR Handleman, Chester
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ABSTRACT

A critical look is taken at the standards and philosophy current in the public schools. The continuing trend of permissiveness at all levels is deplored as producing young people who are unable to function literately after their schooling is finished. It is pointed out that teaching innovations over the past years have resulted in increased disruptive behavior in the classroom and that grade inflation results in an alarming decline in academic standards. (JD)

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REEVALUATING EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

Chester Handleman, Ed. D.
Department of History and
Political Science
Broward Community College
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

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Reevaluating Educational Standards

Many people have tried to explain what went wrong with public education during the past two decades. This was a period when far more money was being spent in this area than ever before in history; when innumerable innovative instructional methods were being employed and when the educational specialists were insisting that they knew what was needed to greatly improve the academic instruction that was being offered to the nation's youth. Yet, after all the expenditure of treasure and of effort, America's public schools, and even many post-secondary institutions, appear to be in more of a crisis than ever. Critics today vehemently proclaim that graduating high school seniors are far less well-prepared in basic academic skills and in subject matter than those of a generation ago. This is clearly indicated by sixteen consecutive years of progressively lower student test scores nationally, as well as poorer reading and writing skills.

As a result of this apparent decline in student learning, a new trend towards greater emphasis on "basic education" is beginning, even though there is much disagreement on the meaning of this term. Organizations such as The Council for Basic Education have for over two decades been supporting such a position; yet it has had relatively little influence on the nation's public schools. In the early fifties, Arthur Bestor, then of the history department of the University of Illinois, among others, had already delineated many weaknesses of

educational philosophies that did not emphasize academic standards and substantive learning. He had repeatedly criticized many of the radically innovative teaching formats of that period which stood for "teaching the student and not the subject"; and those who maintained that improved attitudes, interests and experiences were to be emphasized rather than subject matter--as if the former somehow negated the latter. Innovation as such was not the culprit (change must take place in all human endeavors); rather, it was the, at times, almost universal use of unproven and highly questionable teaching methodologies that were at fault--which often did not include proper evaluation of student achievement.

Prophets who then warned against permissive and free-wheeling education, Bestor included, were ridiculed and excoriated. As the years went by, the "non-punitive grading experts," who often included excessive amounts of audio-visual and unstructured teaching formats, rode roughshod over these serious and insightful prophets. It is true that the loosening of family ties, the excessive use of television in the home, the Vietnam War, Watergate and a host of other developments, including, at times, a disarray in the body politic, have had a deleterious influence on education in this period. Yet it appears that the main culprits for the decline in student achievement levels during this time were certain questionable educational philosophies and the educational establishment itself.

Experience now indicates that many of the unsuccessful teaching methodologies that have developed since the early 1960's

should be modified or withdrawn entirely from the classroom. Yet, even during the past two or three years, while the media and the public itself have been speaking out stridently for more basic and substantive teaching of reading, writing and computing, with reduced emphasis on affective and permissive instructional methodologies, many in the educational establishment strongly resist these efforts. This is not a demand for reduced spending for education or for fewer educational options for students; it is a request for better education. The John Holt-Jonathan Kozal liberal philosophy, as well as myriad numbers of university education departments, still influence the training of many teachers of the public schools. An overemphasis on accomodating "the interests and attitudes" of students, especially from grades six through twelve, still appears to be the preferred format for teaching in far too many classrooms. Academic grade inflation, in spite of recent national publicity on its evil consequences, is still rampant--as it has been for more than a decade. Efforts to moderate this problem have produced little change; student grades for 1977-1978 were no lower than for the previous year. Preliminary data for 1978-1979 indicate that not much improvement has occurred in this period either.

The apologists for permissive and non-substantive education are still flooding the educational journals with many of their discredited ideas--in spite of the overwhelming demands of the public media and of the public for more basic and substantive teaching. A social studies department head in California writes a piece

titled "In Defense of Grade Inflation."[1] He opts for assigning students of limited ability and motivation "a set of expectations well within their reach." Now, he maintains, students will compete "only against themselves . . . will now work close to their full potential." This instructor then admits that some students won't gain the knowledge and skills associated with high grades--but he will give them anyway! What sort of argument is this strange circumlocution? Such a methodology has been used ubiquitously during the past decade and a half; it has also probably contributed to the disastrous achievement levels we are now seeing. Studies indicate that in many instances the grade of "A" in many public schools and even in post-secondary institutions now represents barely "B" level of achievement of a generation ago. This type of deterioration is hardly the way to improve learning (in spite of the concept that student success breeds success). The above cited teacher concludes his questionable argument by saying:

> I have never given a class all A's, but I hope to before I retire from my teaching career. And when I do, I'll be darned if I will apologize to anyone.[2]

If this type of thinking were an aberration, the problem of declining academic standards in the classroom would be minimal. Unfortunately, however, it is ubiquitous--as can be noted from professional journals and in observing classrooms themselves. While the above writer maintains that graduating college students and professional people are better trained than ever before, the hard facts, in all except the most selective schools and colleges, prove otherwise.

Employers constantly complain about the inability of high school graduates (and college graduates as well) to read, write and compute at minimally acceptable levels, or to work effectively in their chosen fields--largely because of limited preparation in academic skills and in substantive knowledge.[3]

Fortunately, there are some people in education who clearly recognize the damage that many questionable and radically innovative teaching methodologies and philosophies have done to American education. Alston Chase, a former department chairman at MacAlister College and a holder of degrees from Harvard, Oxford and Princeton, excoriates what has often passed for academic standards at many public schools and colleges during the past decade or two. He gives an hypothetical example of a college professor of German who does not teach German but, rather, German literature in translation. This instructor has managed to attract a large number of students to his class by announcing that if any students are dissatisfied with a pass/fail grading system, he will be forced to give everyone an "A," since he obviously does not have the time to grade the tests of over one hundred students. This virtually guaranteed "A" grade is the very reason why so many people signed up for the course.[4] The professor, like many others, recognizes that often students take whatever course is easiest and yields the highest grade. He uses this method to attract students so that his department will retain some of the dwindling supply of students; enough so that the three remaining faculty members in the department can retain their jobs.[5]

The above problem and others of this type need never have occurred in American higher education had politicians, educational leaders, administrators, professors of education and teachers in various fields taken a different path towards what constitutes good educational governance and teaching. Public schools and higher education obviously were greatly overexpanded during the past two decades, often for political reasons and to increase the status of educational leaders. Today, with reduced enrollments in most educational institutions, faculty members in numerous academic areas and at all levels are desperately seeking to attract enough students to make their classes viable--with a consequent lowering of academic standards in many instances.

Professor Chase is generally pessimistic about chances for fundamental reform, in spite of the loud demands for higher academic standards from the media and from the public. He believes that the educational establishment resists this type of change--both for philosophical and selfish reasons. While Chase admits that career and vocational training are necessary for the future careers of students, he also argues that educators must not try to be all things to all people in their effort to accommodate their constituents. They should, rather, "dedicate themselves once more to the pursuit of knowledge and to the analysis of values." There should be a better balance between the egalitarian demands of a democratic society and the needs of scholarship.[6]

If the mistakes of the past are not to be exacerbated, now is the time to make improvements on the educational scene; yet these

will not be easy to accomplish. Perhaps there should be more governance by executive leadership and less by committee, especially in higher education, if real improvement is to be made. Too often, since the mid-1960's, decisions at the college and university level have become so bogged down in committee wrangling as to result in weak and compromised administration rather than in solid leadership. Democracy's influence should support quality education rather than the lowest common denominator, whether in academic standards or in educational leadership.

Paul Copperman's The Literacy Hoax offers some possible solutions for the present educational dilemma which are rarely mentioned in professional journals. He is not only sharply critical of many of the highly questionable teaching innovations of recent years; he also maintains that much more authority should once again be given to teachers and to administrators in the public schools.[7] Too often, adolescent students are permitted to disobey and threaten teachers. The latter, not always blameless, of course, have too little authority under present school law to prevent those unfortunate situations, especially in grades six through twelve. He says: "I do not believe young people should be given the freedom not to learn, as has so often been the case in recent years."[7] The permissive and "caring-sharing" stance, that schools should accommodate themselves to all types of students, no matter how uncooperative and even violent, are difficult to understand. This is true in recent years, especially--at the very time when the public is demanding more order and learning.

Those who still take the John Holt-Jonathan Kozal permissive position, and their numbers are legion in the profession, apparently don't understand the deleterious effect that this format has had on public education. Nonlearning situations abound today in the public schools; unbelievable amounts of violence and destruction of property are commonplace. One has only to read the daily newspapers and weekly newsmagazines to verify this sad truth.

The obvious question arises: what should be done with that relatively small percentage of extremely disruptive young people if they are to be removed from the school scene? Three or four decades ago there was a discipline problem in the public schools, but it was minor compared to what exists today. At that time it is true that conditions were quite different in many respects; also, not everyone then managed to receive a high school diploma, certainly not to the extent that it is true today. At present, very uncooperative students of age 14 and over might be better served if they were separated from their present school situations and sent to some form of vocational school, where the curriculum and supervision were better attuned to their personal interests and problems. Extremely difficult students could be sent to work-study camps somewhat similar to the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal period. There they could be trained in useful and practical work for time periods dependent on individual cases. These young people could learn work habits in an atmosphere where they would not only be better supervised than in the public schools; their example might serve as a model for other potentially

disruptive students. This is not a dictatorial approach to the problem of student disruptiveness; it is simply a common sense approach to the problem. In the past the teaching profession has depended too much on "innovative" psychological and permissive classroom methodologies to resolve discipline problems, and the results have usually been disappointing. The suggestions mentioned above, including changes in school law, might produce better and happier results. At these vocational schools and work-study camps young people could learn skills which are in much greater demand than many of those they have been unwilling to learn in a more academic environment. Semi-skilled work today is often more in demand in the American economy than the so-called "academic learning" which uncooperative and often functionally illiterate high school drop-outs (and even graduates) sometimes receive. Further, this plan would bring greater respect for the public schools and for those students who make an effort to succeed. Far from introducing a group of "second-class citizens," this change would upgrade many young people's skills, work habits and abilities. Camp students could be paid a modest wage and would always have the option of returning to school if they were sufficiently motivated and cooperative.

Copperman's book, while not perfect in every way, is generally a fine prescription for stopping the decline of reading, writing and computing abilities in the public schools. Yet the study does have some critics. It is difficult to understand one patently unfair and bitter critic of Copperman's The Literacy Hoax. Joyce Bermel's

review of the book in Change Magazine, after making a number of doubtful and even absurd criticisms, concludes with this questionable bit of wisdom:

> Disliking students [adults as well as Copperman], they dare not trust them to make decisions about their own education or to enjoy that experience. The only way around their distaste and puritanism is to block the students out and to concentrate instead on throwing up structures and barriers: rules, discipline and authority.[10]

It is unfortunate that Change chose a reviewer of The Literacy Hoax so unsympathetic to a somewhat conservative stance for public education. According to the public media and to popular polls, the vast majority of parents and the public at large are overwhelmingly supportive of its major arguments. Well known public figures like former Congresswoman Edith Green and syndicated columnist James Kilpatrick, among myriad others, strongly support Copperman's arguments. Indeed, the latter, as a result of his book's popularity and influence, is a frequent lecturer throughout the nation.

There are many individual characteristics that help make for good classroom teaching. In general, however, the instructor should be serious in his task, should present his material slowly and in a highly structured form and should be as understanding as possible of his students' strengths and weaknesses. It is essential that subjective (written) as well as objective examination formats be used so that students can gain writing experience under formal classroom test conditions. Such "combination-test" grading should not burden a teacher's time excessively. Exclusively objective examination formats

(multiple-choice, true-false) are extensively overused in the public schools, largely because many teachers are unwilling to put any real effort into grading written test papers. With little writing experience, students will not gain necessary writing skills; these have declined drastically in recent years.

Conclusion

Much must be done to stop the academic deterioration in the public schools. A start has already been made with competency testing and by other means, but far more needs to be accomplished. Many circumstances and people are to blame for this educational crisis: our recent political history, excessive use of television in the home, politicians, weak and self-serving educational administrators, overly innovative educational "specialists," teachers, parents, the public and not least, the students themselves. It is true that some teachers may be unqualified to teach for various reasons. Others who could do a better job go along with the path of least resistance. They recognize lack of discipline, grade inflation and other highly questionable practices in their schools, but they are often unwilling to stand up for change in the situation. At the same time, and most important, present school laws too often are biased in favor of student rights rather than school authority. This fact causes great frustration among administrators and teachers. For too long politicians and educational administrators have avoided addressing these most pressing problems.

There is hope for improvement, albeit limited, in the near future. It remains to be seen, however, whether the groups mentioned above can and will cooperate to bring authority, respect and quality to America's public schools, which have for too many years failed to offer the education and training required for today's young people.

NOTES

1. Kane, R.J. "In Defense of Grade Inflation." Today's Education 67:41; November-December 1978.

2. Ibid.

3. Randleman, C. "The Curriculum: The Public Media Versus the Professional Books and Journals." Adolescence XIII; 563-568; Winter 1978.

4. Chase, A. "Skipping through College." Atlantic Monthly 242:33-40.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Copperman, P. The Literacy Hoax: The Decline of Reading, Writing, and Learning in the Public Schools and What We Can Do about It. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978.

8. Ibid., pp. 20-35.

9. Bernel, J. Book Review of The Literacy Hoax by Paul Copperman. Change Magazine 11:61-62; May-June 1979.

10. Ibid.